THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AT PAYNE SEMINARY

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Three problems, each closely related to the other, challenge the present effectiveness and the continued existence of Payne Seminary. Successful solution of any one of them requires attention and action on each of the others simultaneously. While the Seminary can attempt some activities that will temporarily relieve the pressure, final solution rests with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Not until the Church clarifies its concept of its own nature and purpose, bringing this insight to bear on its concept of the kind of ministry essential to the fulfillment of its mission, can any permanent solution be expected or realized.

I

The first problem has to do with the efforts of Payne to attain accreditation by the American Association of Theological Schools. The Seminary Board of Directors, and the responsible agents in the educational work of the church, were unanimous in their consent, encouragement, and support of the effort to make the first step in this direction, securing Associate membership in the Association. This was done. Second thoughts on the part of some when confronted with the problems of enrollment and budget necessary to maintain even this relationship continue to keep alive the question of the value of accreditation for Payne and the A.M.E. Church. The suggestion is advanced regularly that the Seminary should retreat, give up its efforts to remain in the Association and return to the previous level of operation. The Church may not be ready and willing to accept the necessity of working to raise the level of the work here at Payne. However, the pressure for such standards, converging on the church from all sides is such that resistance for any cause whatever gradually reduces the effectiveness of the school to an archaic, irrelevant activity.

The lowering of standards will make it impossible for Payne to hold its own in the matter of recruiting top flight students. Prospective students will reject Payne in favor of schools where they can obtain a quality education.

The argument against high standards here at Payne is the more difficult to understand when it is remembered that the A.M.E. Church participates in an accredited program at Interdenominational Theological Center through Turner Seminary at Morris Brown College in Atlanta. Every effort currently is being put forth to strengthen and enlarge our participation in this project. So far critics of standards here at Payne have been singularly silent in their criticism of even higher standards enforeced at I.T.C. without question.

Other standards required for accreditation must be met as well as the one regarding admission. Our library is woefully short of the minimum requirement of 25,000 volumes. The school has not had the minimum enrollment of 25 students since it has had associate membership. The faculty requirement of 6 full time teachers is beyond reach at present. The physical plant is inadequate, especially at the point of housing for single and married students. Above and beyond this is the need for financial support and stability that will enable the school to meet these minimum standards.

Obviously, if the church does not wish an accredited program here at Payne the pressure to meet these standards will be reduced somewhat. However, some standards will be necessary for whatever type of the school the church does wish to operate. An adequate library, physical plant, and competent faculty are essentials for any school worthy of the name. The standards set forth by AATS can be neglected and ignored for

a while, but not indefinitely. The legitimate expectation is that this school will show immediate and measurable progress toward meeting the minimum each and every year. Absence of this progress will solve the matter of association with AATS for us.

II

The problem of enrollment is closely related to the matter of standards. As has been indicated many people feel that elimination of the requirement of a Bachelor's degree for admission would result in an increased enrollment. What standard the Seminary should have is another matter, however. This is seldom considered or spelled out. The line must be drawn somewhere and at that point, no matter where it is, some applicants will be left out.

There are several ways of increasing the enrollment here without reducing standards. First and foremost is a consistent policy of encouragement and support for those who try to meet the standard for the ministry set by the church. Anything less than this undercuts the standards so willingly and vigorously supported in resolutions. Second, financial aid and support for those who will prepare themselves will enable many to overcome the barrier of finances which stands between them and a theological education.

Both of these require and suppose a deep, consistent, prayerful, concern on the part of every member, every minister, and every congregation for discovering a sufficient quantity and quality of persons for the church's ministry. Without this any attempt at recruitment will be shallow, ineffective, and shortlived. However, these are the very elements in short supply in the church.

If the life and work of the church in the world today requires quality, competence and training so that the ministry can speak to the issues of the day, it follows that standards for that ministry must be at least equal to that of other professions. The present needs and future opportunities of the Church demand a ministry of this caliber.

It must be remembered that recruitment of students is a highly competitive enterprise. How can a school with low, or non-existent standards attract top quality students who will accept nothing less than the best in theological education? Let's put the question another way. Is it reasonable to expect students to select Payne Seminary over I.T.C. where accredited theological education is available for approximately the same cost, in the same amount of time, sponsored by the same church with better financial aid?

Lowering standards is sure insurance that better students will go elsewhere for their Seminary work.

A large enrollment here at Payne can be deceptive. A large enrollment offers no guarantee that the school is doing a significant job in preparing men for the ministry. It may well be that students are attracted because this is not being done. It may be proof positive that the opposite is true. It may be clear evidence of the rejection of standards, the acceptance of mediocrity, and commitment to second rate status.

III

Quality education of any sort is expensive. Theological education, especially when offered on the graduate level is even more so. It is quite true that the cost per

student here at Payne is high and that it would be reduced in direct ratio to an increase in the enrollment. It already has been pointed out that whatever the church decides on the matter of standards and recruitment, certain fixed costs will remain. Library books, equipment, competent faculty, scholarships, grants and loans all cost money. All will be needed in whatever kind of school Payne becomes.

The cheapest way in theological education costs the most money. Providing the best education for the best men will insure the church the best possible leadership - an asset above price. No church can afford to deny itself this for the sake of a few dollars.

There are some obvious alternatives which many people have suggested. The funds presently allocated to Payne can be used in other ways. For example:

1- Payne, its assets, and budget could be transferred to I.T.C. to strengthen and enlarge the A.M.E. church participation in that enterprise. This would not reduce the cost or solve the recruitment problem, however.

2- Payne could be relocated in a major university center, for example in Chicago, to share in a larger program in theological education, gaining benefits in quality of program, opportunities for students, support from local churches and recruitment value. Again there would be no appreciable reduction in the cost. In fact this would involve more money along with the promise of larger success.

3- Payne could be closed, the buildings sold to Wilberforce University, and its budget divided. Part of it, sent to another Seminary such as Oberlin, Boston, Yale, Drew, or the Methodist Seminary in Ohio, could be used to underwrite the cost of a professor's chair. Another part would provide scholarship help for A.M.E. students at that school. The balance, if any, could be used to provide theological scholarships for other students in attendance elsewhere.

4- Payne could be converted into an In-service and Lay leadership training center. The major effort of the church in theological education would be centered elsewhere. Again, the cost of providing specialized staff and resources needed to make this effective would equal if not exceed the cost of the present program here at Payne.

None of these alternatives, or others that may occur, offers a "cheap" way out. There is none if the A.M.E. Church is expected to do a significant job of training persons for the ministry. Further, every one of these raises more problems than it solves.

All of this makes it increasingly clear and obvious that more fundamental questions need to be asked before any long term solution to the problems discussed above can be found.

- -Just what kind of ministry does the A.M.E. Church feel it must have to furnish leadership for its churches now and in the future?
- -What standards will the church enforce to insure a ministry it considers desirable?
- -What kind of educational program, if any, will the A.M.E. Church require, provide, and support for its ministry?
- -Can the A.M.E. Church afford accredited theological education for its ministry if it deems this necessary?
- -Can the A.M.E. Church afford not to provide and support an accredited program in theological education?
- -Where will the A.M.E. Church develop this accredited program? Here at Payne Seminary? At I.T.C. in Atlanta through Turner Seminary? If not at both places, then at which one?

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There is no dodge, excuse or alibi which offers escape from answering these questions. Refusal to answer is itself an answer. The A.M.E. Church has to much at stake to allow chance and external circumstances over which it has no control to play the deciding role in determing its program of training for its ministry. Asking questions tomorrow which should have been answered yesterday is the one sure and certain way to an impotent, ineffective, irrelevant ministry. The A.M.E. Church faces its greatest opportunities today. It will rise to meet them when it resolves these questions, putting the answers into immediate, effective, action in a well defined program of theological education.